

“The Clarifying Storm”

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 7, 2025
Second Sunday of Advent – Peace

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might not fear your
cleansing Spirit in these muddied times. In the name of the One Coming Into the World we
pray, Amen.*

We are working with the theme “Preparing for the Light of Christ” this Advent season, based on our scripture from Isaiah and Matthew. Last week, we talked some about how important it is to let the light of Christ into our hearts and minds so that we can see clearly what is going on around us. So it’s perhaps a bit surprising that today Isaiah suggests that we shouldn’t always trust what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears. Did you catch that bit? Isaiah 11, verse 3b talks about the Messiah promising that “He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear.” The prophet goes on to explain “but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

In other words, the Messiah is wise enough to know that the rich and powerful can and will manipulate what we see and hear in order to get what they want, regardless of who it hurts. While it’s important to see things clearly, it’s also vital to be able to read between the lines, to hear what isn’t being said and notice who wasn’t invited to the table.

On this second Sunday of Advent – Peace Sunday – we have arrived at the moral summit of the season, the day when we remember John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah by calling upon “you brood of vipers” to repent. He clearly had some strong opinions about those Pharisees and Sadducees, which are not really the point anymore; but the need for repentance is timeless. It may seem like an odd choice for a day we want to focus on peace. We might prefer to stick with those verses in Isaiah 11 that describe a fantastical vision of predators and prey all hanging out together, eating straw. But God’s peace is not a supernatural or superficial calm, the comfort we seek when we get home and dim the lights and relax on the couch, shutting out the suffering and stresses of the world. As Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us “Peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.” And justice is the path John B. was inviting people to follow.

If we’re still interested in what it means to see clearly, as followers of Christ, even if that means kinds of seeing beyond what we do with our eyes, we have some interesting metaphors here to explore. The one I want to look at today is John’s reference to how the Messiah will come with his winnowing fork in his hand. I’m guessing most of us don’t use winnowing forks on a regular basis, so I want to slow down here and talk about what that means. Winnowing is part of the process of turning wheat plants into grain that can be ground into flour and used to make bread. Winnowing happens after threshing, which is when the plants have been beaten up a

little to break open the husks so the grains of wheat can come loose. After threshing, you have a pile of broken up wheat stalks, with loose husks (or chaff) and grains all mixed together. That's when you take up your winnowing fork. Winnowing, however, doesn't just require a fork. The fork only throws the mixed-up pile of wheat and chaff into the the air. Two other forces are required for successful winnowing – wind and gravity. When you use that fork to toss the wheat and the chaff into the air, the goal is for the wind to carry the lighter-weight chaff away and for gravity to cause the heavier grain to fall straight down where it can be more easily collected.

Again, if we're examining what it means to see clearly with the eyes of our hearts, winnowing as a metaphor reminds us that this isn't an instantaneous thing, but rather a process. Looking at a cloud of wheat and chaff thrown up in the air isn't going to offer us much clarity at first. It's all basically the same color, the wind is blowing, stuff might be getting in our eyes, and the grains are falling back into the pile they came from, where there are more husks still.

I wonder if this might be why the Messiah doesn't judge based on what his eyes see. Sometimes what we're being shown is so mixed-up it's hard to tell the difference between what is worthy of our attention and what is just noise. The verses that come right after that in Isaiah almost seem connected to a winnowing process. Isaiah has the Messiah striking "the earth with the rod of his mouth," which seems like another way of saying he's shaking things up. Sort of a "throw it all up in the air and see how it

lands” approach to divine judgement, like winnowing. Another way to think of it might be as a giant wind and rain storm washing everything clean. But none of this sounds particularly peaceful, does it?

One way that we try to make this process seem less scary is to imagine that God is sifting out these people from those people. We like to imagine that there are those who do repent and those who refuse, and that is how we know who’s good and who’s bad. Isaiah has the Messiah killing the wicked, after all, “with the breath of his lips.” But tempting as that simplistic understanding may be, deep in our hearts, we know it’s not the way it works.

The winnowing, the shaking loose, even the storm – they happen within us, not between us. The wheat and the chaff, they’re both in our hearts. All of us, not just certain ones of us. All the forces that influence us – church, school, friends, media, ads, bosses, neighbors, family – they’re all mixed up within our souls most of the time. But then, every once in a while, something shifts and we find ourselves in winnowing season, when it’s all being tossed up and shaken around for judgment, with the wind blowing, sweeping away what isn’t fruitful. And it can feel like a storm, pretty much the opposite of peaceful. But then, eventually, the winnowing is finished, and we are left with a quiet clarity and calm. Getting there may have been hard, because we may have had to let go of things we thought we needed. Habits, stuff, preconceived notions about how things work or who other people are – the wind of the Holy Spirit has

swept away what isn't worth keeping, the things that do not lead to justice and peace. The thing about a husk, from the perspective of a grain of wheat, is that it fits really well; it keeps me safe, it protects me. It's comfortable in there. But there comes a moment when you begin to realize that the things that are making you comfortable are keeping you from fulfilling your purpose. They are keeping you from getting together with others in shared purpose and becoming something bigger than yourselves.

Is the wheat terrified of the winnowing fork, or does it look forward to being liberated to become what it is created for? If that wheat is us, the answer is probably Yes. Liberation is not without stress. Justice rarely comes without sacrifice. If we're seeking peaceful clarity, going through a process of mixing things up even more than they already are seems counter-productive. But remember, it's not just that we're throwing things up into the air; we're throwing them up into the clarifying winds of the Holy Spirit, who will free us from the chaff. We're throwing them up from the grounding gravity of God, knowing that what is worthy and good will return to that ground. And eventually the storm is over, and there is peace – peace that is all the more beautiful because it is clear and clean.

We are living in a period of upheaval; everything is being tossed about, carelessly, recklessly, often with the explicit intention of muddying the waters and making it harder to understand what's happening. It's hard to tell when this storm will be over. It's hard to hold onto the vision of peace when the air is full of chaff, getting in our

eyes and making us sneeze. But if we have the humility to call upon the winds of the Holy Spirit, to seek the wisdom and guidance of God to help us see and keep us grounded, we will be able to judge with righteousness and equity ourselves, seeing beyond what our eyes are shown like the Messiah did. We need not fear the winnowing hook or the wind. They are not coming to steal our peace, but to purify it into something truly holy. Hallelujah and Amen.